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THE EDITOR'S DIARY.

Snakes.

WE do not pretend to be able to prove that ours was the first snake; older peoples have had their makers of mischief and now, in common with ourselves, are suffering the penalties incurred through the indiscreet conduct of their heedless ancestors. The accounts of creation and the fall of man passed down through successive generations of Etruscans, Babylonians, Phœnicians and Aryans are quite similar to our own as presented in Genesis. That of the Persians, indeed, is substantially identical. The first couple were living happily without neighbors or other causes of discontent when an evil demon, sent by Ahriman, prince of devils, took the form of a serpent, gave to them fruit of a wonderful tree, which imparted immortality and so made it necessary for them to go to work to provide for the needs of a growing family. Even before this happened, according to the Brahmins, Rahn, "more subtle than the beasts of the fields," had induced Adea Suktee, "the first woman," to partake of the forbidden Soma and to give some to Adima, her husband, with the usual results.

But these are legends. The only authenticated account with which we are familiar is the Chaldean, which is amply confirmed by the cuneiform inscriptions unearthed by George Smith in 1873, depicting the tree, the fruit, the first parents, and the snake standing behind the lady. This illustration, say the archæologists, was drawn some fifteen hundred years before the Hebrews recorded their recollection of the appearance of Adam and Eve. Some even go so far as to suggest that Ezra, who passed a disagreeable summer, about 444 B.C., in Babylon, where the cylinders were found, drew rather freely upon these sources in order to make a suitable beginning for the revised version of the Hebrew Bible which subsequently he completed in Jerusalem.

Be that as it may; as we have already hinted, neither the snakes nor the ancestors of others possess for us an interest comparable to that attending our own, whose memories we shall continue to revere and cherish. But, while thus becomingly indulgent, we frankly confess impatience with those who persist in asserting that our snake was not a snake, but was an ape or a spider or something even more obnoxious. True, as the learned Dr. Adam Clarke observes, he must have walked erect, for this is necessarily implied in his judgment, and he must have possessed the power of speech in whatever language was then in vogue, because there is no indication that Eve was surprised when he accosted her. But it does not follow that he was an orang-outang simply because that obnoxious creature meets those requirements. Hissing is as intelligible to this day as gibbering, and the Chaldeans produce documentary evidence to show that the tempter, in his traditional form, stood upright. In any case, we prefer to believe, with the equally learned Dr. Henry, that the devil chose to act his part in a serpent, because "it is a specious creature and has a spotted, dappled skin"—*i. e.*, is more attractive than the ape and thus more likely to find favor in the eyes of a representative of the more artistic and susceptible sex.

That the snake was a male we feel far less certain. Indeed, there are many evidences, both external and internal, though not contained in Genesis, to the contrary. Ezra was an able and conscientious editor, but made errors of judgment, as other editors have done since, especially in discriminating between the essentials and non-essentials of a complete narrative. For years and years theologians have been trying in vain to reconcile the Jehovistic and Elohist accounts of creation presented in Genesis. We are convinced that the necessity of making specious and unconvincing explanations would never have arisen if Ezra had not edited so closely. But his omission, whether from heedlessness or design, of any reference whatever to the very important part played by Lilith in the beginning of things seems hardly pardonable. The materials were at hand, drawn from the same sources as those which he utilized. The Chaldean inscriptions and the Arabic legends, extant in Babylon while he was engaged upon his great work, afford a quite simple solution of the vexatious problem. Lilith was created at the same time and in the same way as Adam. "Male and female created he them" and endowed them

with equal rights and privileges. But, runs the chronicle, Adam, tactless and domineering, "began the first conversation by asserting that he was to be the master." The high-spirited lady indignantly repudiated this claim of superior authority. Whereupon, Adam insisting, Lilith uttered a certain spell called *schemhamphorasch*, of famous potency in Jewish folk lore, obtained wings thereby and "flew out of Eden and out of sight," or as stated subsequently in Revelations, not edited by Ezra, "To the woman were given two wings of a great eagle, that she might fly into the wilderness." How subsequently Lilith married Samaël, who illumined a character not otherwise above reproach by treating her as an equal and left many descendants, some of whom are even now bombarding the Houses of Parliament, though interesting and important, is not germane to a consideration of the relative merits of snakes. But even in that early day it was recognized to be ill for man to live alone, so a second wife was formed, and this time out of Adam's rib in order that there should be no question of her subjection.

We perceive, therefore, that Ezra had only to tell the whole story to harmonize the two seemingly conflicting Biblical accounts of creation. His reasons for eliminating so material a portion are, as we have said, conjectural. It may be that he feared to offend the pride of his people by letting them know that their original ancestress was a second wife, or he may have been an anti-suffragist and desirous of withholding from the equal rights' movement the advantage of Scriptural authority. Accepting the Arabic version, which incidentally was derived from Jewish sources by converts of Mahomet from Cabbalism and Rabinism, we must conclude that now, strictly speaking, anti-suffragists should be regarded as daughters of Eve and suffragists as daughters of Lilith. To both would accrue certain satisfaction from such differentiation. Eve seems to have been the better woman, but credulous and stupid; while Lilith, though a disturber of domestic tranquillity and somewhat peremptory in manner, was far more intelligent and handsome, had beautiful hair and dressed like a queen in comparison with Eve in her traditionally simple raiment.

The question is, Was Lilith the snake? Comestor, the great historical scholar of the twelfth century, insists that, while the serpent stood erect, it had a virgin's head. Even as far back as

the eighth century was made a missal, which is still in existence, showing Eve taking the apple from Lilith, whose features are clearly defined and whose serpentine body entwines the tree. Pietro d'Orvieto illustrates the same idea in his finest fresco in Pisa and Michel Angelo's famous picture in the Sistine chapel is familiar. We cannot accept this masterpiece, however, beautiful as it is, as historically accurate, because of Adam's presence and his obvious preference for his first wife. Whatever may have been Adam's defects in character, his marital fidelity has never been questioned, and, though he bewailed bitterly the loss of Lilith, we have no doubt that, having once espoused Eve, he remained true to her, just as his sons continue faithful to their second wives to this day.

Even though we assume that Lilith did play the part attributed to her by the great painters, it does not follow that her intent was evil. As we have noted, she began life as a suffragist and was devoted to the cause. What more natural than that her heart should be saddened by the appearance of a sister living in subjection to man in ignorance of her inherent rights? And what more fitting to do, to demonstrate her zeal, than to strive to make a convert by giving her the means of acquiring the requisite knowledge? True, the results of her, perhaps, misguided efforts have not been altogether happy. As a consequence, we are forced to live in a world full of sin and misery; and yet would crowded existence in a state of ignorance, deprived of the joys and sorrow which we now have the intelligence to enjoy, be more endurable? It is a matter of taste, of course; but for ourselves, frankly, we would as lief be an angel.

Whether or not the devil remained in our first snake and was transmitted to his or her descendants is a question as yet undetermined. As we all know, plans were changed rapidly during the creative period. For example, the parents were expected to die if they ate of the forbidden fruit, but they did not, at least for a great many years; the serpent, too, was condemned to crawl on his belly and eat dust, whereas he walks on ribs which serve as feet and eats insects and frogs and toads and the like, to the great advantage of agricultural development. There surely does seem to exist in man a spontaneous enmity towards snakes, but there is no indication that the snake is instinctively antagonistic to men. Its attitude is rather of fear and

apprehension, like that of other wild animals, which seek to avoid encounter, fight only in self-defence and considerably give notice of intention to strike. It is a question, too, whether man's unfriendliness is not attributable to the teachings of his youth that he is presumed to hate snakes and has Scriptural warrant for destroying them. The early passion for killing birds and rabbits is quite as strong as that for killing snakes, but is modified and controlled subsequently by custom and civilizing agencies opposed to brutality. The snake of to-day, therefore, clearly has good cause for grievance. He had no part in the tragedy of Eden and, being really stupid rather than exceptionally subtil, as he has been depicted, he cannot be expected to understand why he should have been singled out of all brute creation for the special animosity of superior man. But since, in point of fact, he has been the harassed victim of Scriptural authority all these years, surely it is not to be wondered at that he has become timid and miserable and incapable of development such, for example, as has transformed the fierce wolf into the tractable collie.

It is a matter of gratification, naturally, that our snake was considered to be as intelligent as his predecessors; but there was really no need of exceptional acumen to enable him to play his part successfully. If the Devil took possession of his body in order to accomplish a nefarious purpose, it was the Devil, not the snake, who framed the enticing argument for the unsuspecting Eve. If, again, it was Lilith who seized an opportunity to advance the cause of woman suffrage, clearly 'twas her keen appreciation of the power of curiosity that led to the fall. In either case the snake was a mere dupe used by one more cunning than himself to further a project in which he had no personal interest and whose method of accomplishment was foreign to his shy inclinations. If he had been as crafty as he has been reputed, can one suppose for a moment that he would have assumed a rôle which was certain to win the everlasting hatred of mankind? No; there have been and are good snakes and bad snakes just as there have been good Eves, like Godiva, or Good-eva, of Coventry, and as there are bad Eves, some of whom we know; but there is no real ground for the common belief that snakes are endowed with peculiar sapience. "Be ye wise as serpents" was a simple injunction to avoid trouble even as, "Be ye harmless as doves," although, of course, it is remotely possible

that the wide-spread recognition of the reputed sagacity of the serpent then holding forth at Abonotichus gave effectiveness to the comparison.

No snake that ever lived won greater fame for the time than Alexander's. Lucian tells the story. Apollonius, a master of the magic arts, had many disciples, among whom was a practising physician who lived in Abonotichus, a small town on the shore of the Black Sea. There Alexander was born of humble parentage and imbibed from the old doctor all that he had learned from Apollonius of medicine and magic. He was a lad of striking appearance, tall, handsome, with a fine head of hair, lustrous brown eyes and a voice sweet and limpid. "God grant," wrote Lucian, who knew him, "that I may never meet with such another. His cunning was wonderful, his dexterity matchless. His eagerness for knowledge, his capacity for learning and power of memory were equally extraordinary."

Such was the well-favored young peasant who sallied forth from his native town in search of fame and fortune. Soon he fell in with one Coconnas, a shrewd tipster for the races and somewhat of a juggler. The two rogues joined forces and meddled about telling fortunes. Arriving at Pella, they found a great number of huge, harmless snakes, which lived in the houses, played and slept with the children and destroyed poisonous rats. Alexander promptly purchased one of the largest, a veritable monster, so tame that it would coil about his body and remain in any desired position. Then he made a human face for it out of linen, painted it ingeniously and shaped it so that the mouth would open and shut by an arrangement of horse-hair, letting the forked tongue shoot in and out at the will of the master. Having no further use for Coconnas, he either administered poison to him or let him die from some infection and returned with his snake to his native town. There he declared himself a prophet and announced that the god *Æsculapius* was about to appear. The people were eager for a new divinity.

When the great day arrived Alexander pretended to discover in a puddle of water a goose-egg which he had placed there after removing the contents, substituting a small embryo snake just born and carefully sealing the shell with wax. When the multitude had gathered he broke the shell and produced the tiny creature, which in a few moments grew to be the monster from

Pella by the simple process of substitution. Thereafter the big snake, believed to be *Æsculapius*, led a busy life. He gave seances, told fortunes in writing and even spoke freely, with the aid of the prophet's ventriloquial powers. Alexander grew rich and powerful, kept a small army of retainers and spies, wielded no little influence over the government even at Rome and died at a ripe old age in the fulness of his renown. What became of the snake nobody knows. Probably at the last the prophet despatched the faithful creature to prevent the discovery of his deception after his death.

The fact that some snakes eject poison against their enemies is held to justify their indiscriminate extinction. We fail to see how. They did not have the choice of their means of defence; they necessarily took what the Lord gave them and they act as instinct directs. Clearly reason is not their guide, else they would not notify an intended victim, but would strike in silence. It is pleasing to think that in this they are actuated by a high sense of honor and fairness, but we do not venture so much as a supposition that they possess an attribute so fine. It is more likely, as Darwin maintains, that the rattlesnake uses its rattle, the cobra expands its frill and the puff-adder swells and hisses in order to alarm the many birds and beasts which are known to attack the most venomous species, acting on the same principle which impels a hen to ruffle its feathers when a dog approaches its chickens. In any case, none of the traditional shrewdness or cunning is manifest in its performance.

Exceptional love of music would redound to the credit of any other living creature as indicative of refined taste, but in the maligned snake even this artistic attribute is a mark of derogation. Our own Quakers, for example, take up and endorse the diatribe of Epiphanius against the flute-players. "Observe the figure that the player makes in blowing. Does he not bend himself up and down to the right hand and the left, like unto the serpent? These forms hath the Devil used to manifest his blasphemy against things heavenly, to destroy things upon earth, to encompass the world, capturing right and left such as lend an ear to his seductions." And so on. But not a word do we hear in condemnation of the unregenerate birds that carol heedlessly even while the minister is painting the horrors of an unmentionable place.

Ah, well! Let us hold fast to the old traditions. Adam may be properly censurable for leaving a nescient lady subject to her own susceptibilities at a critical time in the shaping of human history. Eve herself may not have been overbright. Still, such as our first parents were, they continue to be ours in fond recollection, and there we would keep them. Even Lilith, if Ezra had permitted, we would not lose.

“The rose and poppy are her flowers; for where
Is he not found, O Lilith, whom shed scent
And soft-shed kisses and soft sleep shall snare?
Lo! as that youth’s eyes burned at thine, so went
Thy spell through him, and left his straight neck bent,
And round his heart one strangling golden hair.”

Such as she there are and always will be. Who, if honest, would have it otherwise? So, too, with the snake in the garden. He may not have been the first and the devil may have been in him; but he is ours and we shall continue to think of the time when—

“his words, replete with guile,
Into her heart too easy entrance won:
Fixed on the fruit she gazed.”

For him we crave no indulgence; consideration for his progeny is all we ask, and that for the reasons noted, namely, that the snake of to-day is neither vicious nor cunning, but shrinking and docile, and is actuated, not by intelligence, but by the instinct with which it was endowed.

Truth to tell, an illuminating illustration of this fact may be found in the episode which gave rise to these reflections. The family were at dinner when there came a tap at a door seldom opened. Winning no attention, it was repeated and again a third time, though more softly, and then the door was swung back and, behold! there was a snake, knocking at the portals of hospitality. Down upon its head, in conformity with the decree of tradition and with Ezra’s understanding of Scriptural direction, crunched a British boot. It was a mother snake, who, having bravely overcome her fear of man, was seeking sustenance, not for herself perhaps, though she was starving, but more likely for the little ones that were found in the grass by the brook. Thus for once, at any rate, did the craftiness of the devil succumb to the instinct of motherhood.